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Soviet Efforts to Strengthen the Family

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Summary

In order to increase the rate of growth of the population, especially the Slavic part, and reinforce broad social and political stability objectives, the Soviet regime is striving to strengthen family life. Measures adopted in recent years to promote the family include partially paid maternity leave, cash grants for births, expansion of the child-care network, preferential access to services for young families, and a massive media campaign. A recent rise in the birth rate indicates some success for these steps. However, the divorce rate continues to climb, exerting downward pressure on the birth rate. Efforts to strengthen the family will have a limited impact because of shortages of housing and important consumer services and the prevalence of alcoholism, major obstacles to family stability.

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The Soviet Union has just concluded a major socio-demographic survey that will provide information useful to the regime's program to strengthen family life. That program is aimed at reinforcing broad social and political stability objectives in general and at reversing longstanding unfavorable demographic trends, especially evident since publication of the 1970 census.

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The regime is seeking detailed information on marital status, housing, occupation, and effectiveness of family assistance programs from 14 million Soviet citizens (about 5 percent of the total population). The respondents are also being asked to rank, with respect to importance to their standard of living, such variables as food supply, medical services, housing, and assortment and quality of consumer durables.

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Regime Acts to Bolster Family

The 1970 census results showed a slowdown in the growth of the population--geographically, mainly in the European parts of the USSR and, ethnically, mainly among Slavs--an increase in the number of single people, and a decrease in family size. Through the 1970s, Soviet efforts to counter these developments--common in much of the industrialized world--were largely limited to public relations campaigns. The social welfare measures the regime enacted were not specifically directed toward enhancing family stability. In the 1980s, however, the regime took more specific substantive action. Measures to bolster the family have included creation of family counseling centers, sex education programs in schools, and interest-free housing construction loans, as well as preferential access for young families to medical, trade, and personal services. To reverse the falling Slavic birth rate and reduce the high rate of divorce, the regime in 1981 instituted partially-paid maternity leave for one year; lump-sum grants for first,

second, and third births;[1] and an expansion of the childcare network. [redacted] 25X1

Meanwhile, media campaigns have linked family stability and higher birth rates to patriotism, proclaimed that social prestige rises with the number of children in the family, stressed that broken homes cause juvenile delinquency, and declared that divorce lowers life expectancy. [redacted] 25X1

The regime sees a stronger family as the main instrument not only for furthering demographic goals but for promoting moral values as well. In contrast to past thinking that collective bodies--the Party, the community, etc.--were the main sources of social cohesion, the Soviet leadership now regards the family as "one of the main pillars of society," as a recent article in the cultural journal Literaturnaya gazeta put it. [redacted] 25X1

Birth Rate Rises but Problems Remain

The regime's actions, particularly the family assistance measures of 1981, appear to have enjoyed some success. The number of births in 1983 reached a postwar record of 5.5 million. The birth rate jumped from 18.9 births per 1,000 in 1982 to 20.1 in 1983, an increase of 6 percent, with a large number of births occurring in regions around Moscow that traditionally have a low birth rate. Some of this increase may be due to a rise in the share of the total population of women in the high fertility age groups (20-29 years). Indeed, reflecting this development, the birth rate had been rising gradually since the late 1970s. But the major upturn that occurred in 1983 could be attributed only in small measure to this demographic phenomenon. Continuation of the rapid increase in the birth rate that occurred in 1983 is unlikely. We expect a return to a more gradual rise, in part, because a

[1] This measure favors areas and ethnic groups where birth rates are relatively low, i.e., European parts of the USSR, since no grants are awarded beyond the third child. The Muslim southern-tier republics where birth rates remain high will benefit least from this measure.

smaller number of women will be entering the high-fertility age groups for the next several years. This factor will probably offset additional pronatal incentives promised for the 12th Five-Year Plan (1986-1990), such as extending partially paid maternity leave to 18 months. [redacted] 25X1

There are moreover, many continuing obstacles to a sharp rise in the birth rate. The high rate of abortion among Soviet women limits family formation and, furthermore, jeopardizes their childbearing capacity. Abortion is the most common means of family limitation in the USSR; an estimated 7 to 10 million abortions are performed annually, or 1.5 to 2 times the number of live births. The right to abortion is staunchly defended, and the only effective limit on its demand would be an increase in the desire to have children. This, in turn, would require an improvement in those factors that encourage family life. [redacted] 25X1

The number of divorces, which has increased by 45 percent since 1970, continues to climb and also will exert growing downward pressure on the birth rate. Roughly one-third of Soviet marriages end in divorce, although the rate in urban areas in the western republics is closer to 50 percent. About 40 percent of divorces occur among those who have been married less than 4 years. The principal reasons cited for divorce include alcoholism among males, early marriage, lack of housing, and unequal sharing of household responsibilities between husbands and wives (as characterized by Krokodil's cartoon depicting married life in the USSR). A recent Soviet survey indicates that alcoholism is the chief cause of divorce in 60 percent of blue collar families, while it is listed as primary in 18 percent of families of white collar workers. The nationwide housing shortage was also found to be a major risk factor for young marriages. Research indicates that more than 60 percent

of divorced couples in Estonia there did not have their own apartment when first married and that this lack of privacy contributed to marital instability. [redacted] 25X1

Soviet efforts to strengthen the family are likely to have only limited impact. The key to encouraging greater family stability lies in providing more housing and selected consumer services, which can only be accomplished slowly because of investment stringencies. Finally, other elements of Soviet policy continue to undermine efforts to promote family life. Low average earnings which virtually compel women to work, and the high rate of female labor force participation--about 90 percent--contribute to a low birth rate. On the other hand, the high rate of female employment has given women a degree of financial independence that has made it easier to leave a bad marriage. Today Soviet women initiate about 65 percent of the divorces, a reversal of the situation 30 years ago when many fewer women were in the labor force. [redacted] 25X1